



ROCKEFELLER, E.

THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY

1230 YORK AVENUE

NEW YORK, NY 10021

June 19, 1980

JOSHUA LEDERBERG

PRESIDENT

Ms. Eileen Rockefeller
Shelburne Farms Resources
Shelburne, Vermont 05482

Dear Eileen:

I was very pleased that you raised that very interesting question about the narrowing of the gene pool of our crop plants. By coincidence yesterday's Times had an informative article on that and I am enclosing a copy for your interest.

A committee of the National Academy of Sciences has also been deeply engaged with these issues; and if you have any interest in more detailed information on the extent of the threat, and some of the recommended steps to respond to it, I will be glad to look for a copy to send you.

As I said at the meeting I think that on balance the patenting of plants may do more good than harm: although it is very difficult to trace out the full net of consequences. The basic issue is how to compensate farmers, and indirectly the rest of the economy, for giving up short term gains in order to avoid future catastrophes. It is hard for me to see any mechanism by which we could impose specific practices on the choice of seed grains; certainly what we must do is to find ways to conserve the genetic variety that still exists around the world. This was a rather important element in the discussion between American botanists and Chinese during a visit to the PRC. They have indicated some concern and response; but the best I can translate their position is, that they are ill equipped to afford the costs that would be involved in systematic conservation of a wide variety of plant materials: obviously we need some international mechanism to provide for the necessary funding as well as coordination of these efforts.

Yours sincerely,


Joshua Lederberg

Encl. - see E. R. file

N.Y. Times article

"Botanists warn of short measure?" 6/17/80